

# A CRITIQUE OF “SMART-GROWTH” PLANS

Across the country and particularly in large metropolitan regions, people are talking about growth. While most appreciate the tremendous economic and social benefits that come with growth, many people are expressing concern over “growing pains,” such as traffic congestion, school overcrowding, and the development of open spaces. Some advocates and politicians have coalesced behind a set of growth strategies they describe as “smart growth”. But before supporting these strategies, concerned groups and individuals need to take a careful look at the policy details of the “smart growth” agenda.

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## Background

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Some advocates and politicians have coalesced behind a set of growth strategies they describe as “smart growth.” To these proponents, “smart growth” means the imposition of growth boundaries to limit development in the suburbs, thereby decreasing the average person’s living space (for example, allowing only the development of high-rise apartments and townhouses) and stopping new infrastructure investments (such as roads, waterlines, and sewers).

## The Myth

“Smart-growth” practices, such as the imposition of suburban growth boundaries, increasing housing density, and transportation policies that invest more in rail transit and less in road improvements, will reduce traffic con-

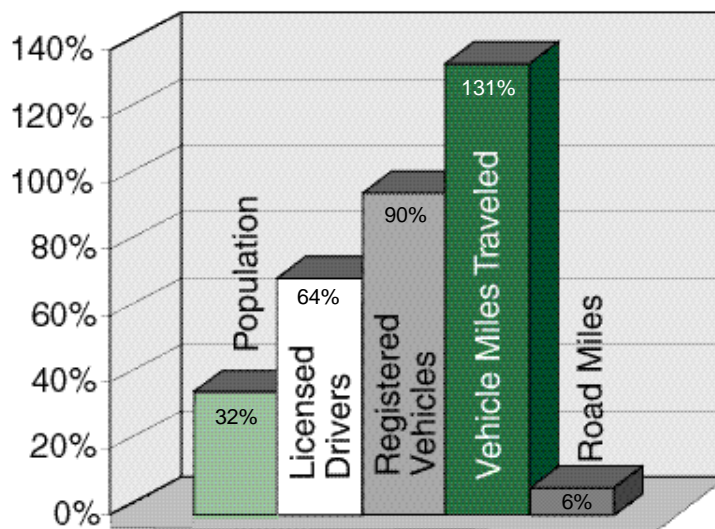
gestion, slow suburban development, and make communities more livable.

## The Facts

**Americans value their freedom to choose where to live and work and how to travel. “Smart-growth” plans aimed at decreasing personal living space and stopping new roads and road improvements will significantly limit home and travel choices.**

- Americans are choosing to drive more now than ever. Since 1970, the U.S. population has grown by 32 percent, the number of licensed drivers by 64 percent, the number of vehicles by 90 percent, and the number of miles driven each year by an amazing 131 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 1990; U.S. Department of Transportation).
- Increased travel requires additional road capacity to avoid congestion. While the number of miles driven annually has increased 131 percent over the past three decades, road mileage in the United States grew from 3,730,082 miles in 1970 to 3,944,601 miles in 1997—an increase of just 5.7 percent (U.S. Department of Transportation).

## Increases in Travel Demand and Road Capacity Since 1970



Source: Federal Highway Administration & U.S. Census Bureau

- As a result, more than 31 percent of urban freeways are congested, and congestion now costs Americans more than \$72 billion a year in wasted time and fuel, according to the Texas Transportation Institute (1999).
- More than ever, Americans are choosing to live and work in the suburbs. Over half the population now lives in the suburbs, where 40 percent of jobs are located. Most workers commute from one suburb to another since more jobs are being created in the suburbs than anywhere else, according to transportation expert Alan Pisarski (1996).
- Growth boundaries and similar restrictions on development can make housing less affordable, limiting the choices available to homebuyers.
- Many of the factors that suburbanites list as top priorities in deciding where to live—an affordable, spacious house with a yard and low traffic congestion—are incompatible with the “smart-growth” vision of high-density, apartment-style living and restricted highway capacity.

**Severe restrictions on growth promote high-density living and prevent the construction and improvement of roads, thereby leading to further traffic congestion.**

- Regardless of density, driving accounts for more than 80 percent of all commuter trips in every urban area in the United States except New York City, according to U.S. Department of Transportation. The Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) has compared urban population densities with patterns of automobile travel and concluded that congestion gets worse as density increases unless highway capacity also increases.
- Increased density may result in lower *per-person* automobile use, but total automobile use increases with density because of the higher population in the affected area. For example, if doubling the population density in a region cuts automobile use by 20 percent on a per-capita basis, total automobile use will rise by

60 percent. Additional road capacity will be necessary to avoid increased congestion.

**A fundamental problem with encouraging high-density, apartment-style living is that most people choose to live otherwise.**

- In NAHB’s nationwide survey, 83 percent of respondents said they would prefer a detached, single-family home in the suburbs instead of an equally priced townhouse in the city, even though the suburban home would necessitate longer distances to work, shopping, and public transportation.

**By artificially limiting the supply of available land, growth boundaries drastically increase housing costs.**

- For example, disproportionate shares of the nation’s least affordable housing markets are in Oregon where growth boundaries have been in effect for more than 20 years. Rapid population growth may account for some of the increased housing costs in Portland, Eugene, Salem, and Medford, but other fast-growing cities, such as Denver, Las Vegas and Phoenix, are not included among the nation’s most expensive housing markets. The artificial shortage of land created by Oregon’s growth boundaries has made home ownership unaffordable for some residents.
- Growth boundaries create higher population densities by channeling new residential and commercial development into areas within the boundary. High-density housing generally equals more-expensive housing. The NAHB’s housing-affordability index indicates that the nation’s 25 most affordable housing markets have an average population of 1,260 people per square mile, while the 25 most expensive housing markets have an average density more than two-and-a-half times higher (3,170 per square mile).

**We should focus first on preserving open, green space close to home, such as neighborhood playgrounds, rather than large tracts of land in distant areas.**

- Most people expressing an interest in the preservation of open, undeveloped space want

that space close to home. They want larger backyards, neighborhood playgrounds, and city parks, market research has indicated.

- A prohibition against development in one area will inevitably result in development (and the elimination of open space) elsewhere. Efforts to preserve large tracts of open space by imposing growth boundaries or similar development restrictions can create leap-frog, noncontiguous development, described as “hyper-sprawl” by David Schulz (1998).

## Our Position

Americans value their freedom to choose where they live and work and how they travel. People continue to live and work in the suburbs because they enjoy the quality of life in those communities. So-called “smart-growth” plans aimed at increasing housing densities and limiting highway capacity will restrict home and travel choices.

While some growth management is necessary to help alleviate the challenges associated with growth, such policies should follow, and not dictate, public sentiment. Growth-management policies must work with, not against, the overwhelming housing preference in this country: the detached, single-family home. While

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transit plays an important role in serving the transportation needs of some commuters, most Americans rely on the mobility and flexibility of travel offered them by the automobile. Growth management policies that restrict mobility, such as the failure to build needed road capacity, run counter to the needs and choices of most Americans.

“Smart-growth” policies, particularly those aimed at increasing urban density, often lead to higher housing costs and increased traffic congestion.

Building additional road capacity is an effective way to reduce traffic congestion and make transportation more efficient. Policies aimed at shifting people out of private vehicles and into public transit have been ineffective as people continue to meet the growing demand for mobility by making travel decisions based on convenience, cost, comfort, and safety. Policies aimed at preserving open, green space should focus on areas close to home. Americans prefer larger backyards, neighborhood playgrounds, and city parks to tracts of land in outlying areas.

## Endnotes

National Association of Home Builders. (1999). *Housing Opportunity Index, First Quarter 1999*. <[www.nahb.com](http://www.nahb.com)>.

Pisarski, Alan. (1996). *Commuting in America II*. Washington, D.C.